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SUBJECT: SERBIA: SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH BISHOP IRINEJ ON KOSOVO AND
CHURCH

REF: BELGRADE 1585 (2007)

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Novi Sad Bishop Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) said although the Church disagreed with U.S. policy on Kosovo, he renounced recent violence and said the Church should continue dialogue with the diplomatic community. Irinej did not feel Kosovo independence was a utopia and would not rule out it might one day return to Serbia. Expressing mixed feelings toward the United States, he said the United States was a symbol of freedom but also a country of double standards. End Summary.

KOSOVO IMPORTANT, BUT SERBIA CANNOT REMAIN IN ISOLATION

2. (SBU) Bishop Irinej Bulovic, Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) Bishop of Novi Sad and Backa, spoke to the DCM about Kosovo policy and the state of U.S. - Serbia relations on March 21. Referring to the February 21 protest and violence against foreign embassies, he said the worst was over. "I hope this incident will not renew itself. Directly or indirectly, our government is responsible for violence and it has to ensure it does not happen again," he said. He stressed it was important to remember that grief for Kosovo was the key issue that brought to the streets most of the 200,000 - 300,000 rally participants who protested peacefully.

3. (SBU) Irinej said even though the SOC was against U.S. policy on Kosovo, it was necessary to differentiate between policy and people. "Many Americans are also against some U.S. policies," he said, citing Iraq as an example. Striking a careful balance between past and present, he said Serbia had a different sense of history than the United States. "We cannot just say 'that was over, this is it'. But Serbia cannot remain in isolation, and this is why the Church must reach out and talk to the diplomatic community," he said.

INDEPENDENT KOSOVO NOT A UTOPIA

4. (SBU) Irinej told the DCM that whichever parties formed the new government following May elections, they could not be expected to recognize Kosovo. He added that the story on Kosovo is not over once and for all. "An independent Kosovo is not a utopia. It can't be ruled out that Kosovo might again be a part of Serbia one day," he said. Echoing a previous request Metropolitan Amfilohije made to the Ambassador, he said it was

important to re-establish Serb communities in Kosovo. "We need Serbs to return to Kosovo. They are refugees in their own country," he said.

IRINEJ'S (AND SERBIA'S) MIXED FEELINGS TOWARD THE U.S.

15. (SBU) Demonstrating mixed feelings toward the United States, he said the U.S. was the symbol of freedom when he was young. "But there was a double standard. Tito was a good ally to the U.S. because he was against Russia but the U.S. failed to look at problems inside Yugoslavia. I am afraid there are few America-philes left in Serbia," he said. He told the DCM the Church needed to modernize and evolve its image in the U.S., sending abroad priests with good language skills and prepared to engage diaspora congregations.

HELP WITH NEC

16. (SBU) Per DCM's request, Irinej promised to appeal to Amfilohije on the unresolved land issue related to the future site of the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade. He told the DCM this assistance did not mean Serbia agreed with U.S. policy, but that it was crystal clear to him the government must not put up obstacles on this and thought Amfilohije could help.

PATRIARCH STILL ILL

17. (SBU) Irinej said Patriarch Pavle's health was still poor. Although faring a bit better, he could not take care of church responsibilities, Irinej said. He said media speculation about his accession continued, but nothing had been determined.

COMMENT

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18. (SBU) Though frank about his views on Kosovo, Irinej emphasized throughout the meeting it was crucial for the Church to maintain open lines of communication with the diplomatic community. An intellectual at heart, Irinej remains a respectable, forward looking voice of reason within the Church. End Comment.

MUNTER